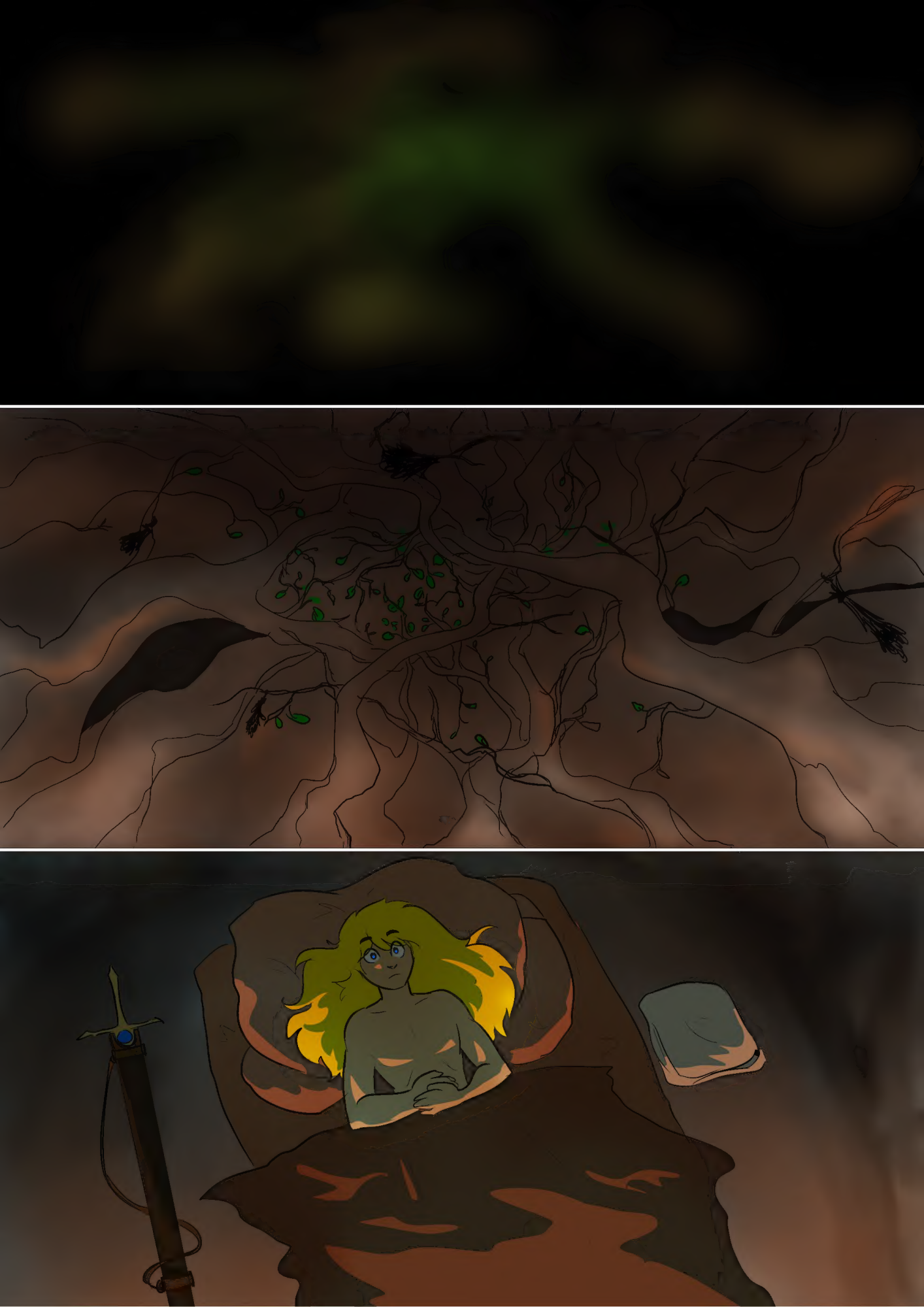
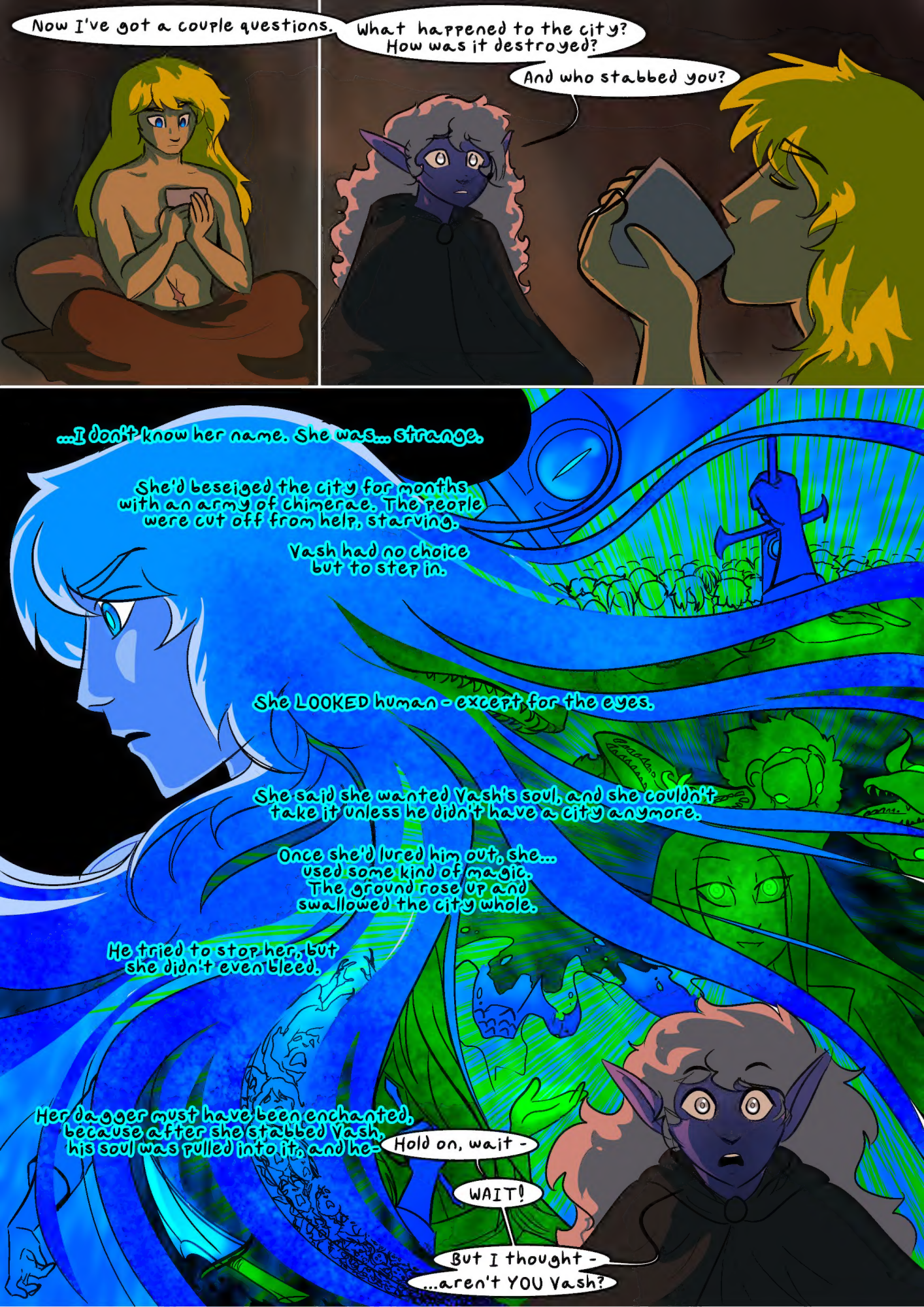
Chapter 2
Among the Trees



CLINK
GLBLRGLRGL
TINK TAST

Who are you?
Where am I?
Calm down.
You're not from Vash. Are you Godless?
Were you with HER?
One thing at a time.
How are you feeling?
I, uh.
Better than when I was bleeding out?
That's good.
My name is Alinua, this is my home, and I'm not a citizen but I'm not a godless exile either.
And before you ask, this is tea.


Now I've got a couple questions.
What happened to the city? How was it destroyed?
And who stabbed you?
...I don't know her name. She was... strange.
She'd beseiged the city for months with an army of chimerae. The people were cut off from help, starving.
Vash had no choice but to step in.
She LOOKED human - except for the eyes.
She said she wanted Vash's soul, and she couldn't take it unless he didn't have a city anymore.
Once she'd lured him out, she... used some kind of magic. The ground rose up and swallowed the city whole.
He tried to stop her, but she didn't even bleed.
Her dagger must have been enchanted, because after she stabbed Vash, his soul was pulled into it, and he-
Hold on, wait -
WAIT!
But I thought -
...aren't YOU Vash?

I'm not! That's weird, right?
Yes!
Yes, that's weird!
You - you look just like his incarnation, you were healing too fast -
And this is Vash's sword! If you're not him, why do you have it?
I - hold on, I'm not sure how to explain it.
I'm not Vash.
I'm... what he left behind?

...are you SURE you're feeling okay?
Considering I shouldn't exist, I'm doing pretty good.
The first thing I remember clearly is waking up.
Before that, it's more like a dream.
Vash was stabbed.
The totality of his essence, freed from his destroyed city, was drawn into the enchanted blade, and she took him into the caves.
She left his body abandoned - but his body was a war machine. It wasn't built to die quickly.
It was damaged, soulless, empty... but still alive.
And then, after a little while,
I realized I existed.

At first I didn't know where I was - WHAT I was.
It was bright, I was in pain -
I had a body,
but it wasn't mine.
I had memories, but they
were distant, like a story I'd been told.
I didn't feel real. NOTHING felt real.
Then I heard him.
Vash, calling out from
deep underground.
He didn't know how I'd
happened, but he didn't care.
He needed help, and I was the only one listening.
Of course, I was still bleeding out
from the wound the collector gave him,
so I didn't exactly get very far.
But since you
healed me, I might
have a chance!

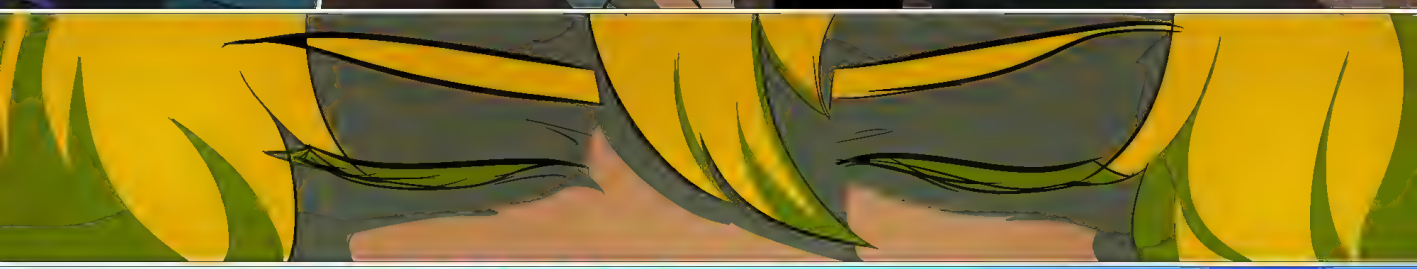
Since I...
You did heal me, right? I just assumed -
I mean, this tree must have been shaped by life magic, and it would take a skilled healer to deal with my-
You can't leave.

I can't?
Why not?
What's going on?
...Are you okay?
Not for a very long time.
And unfortunately, neither are you.

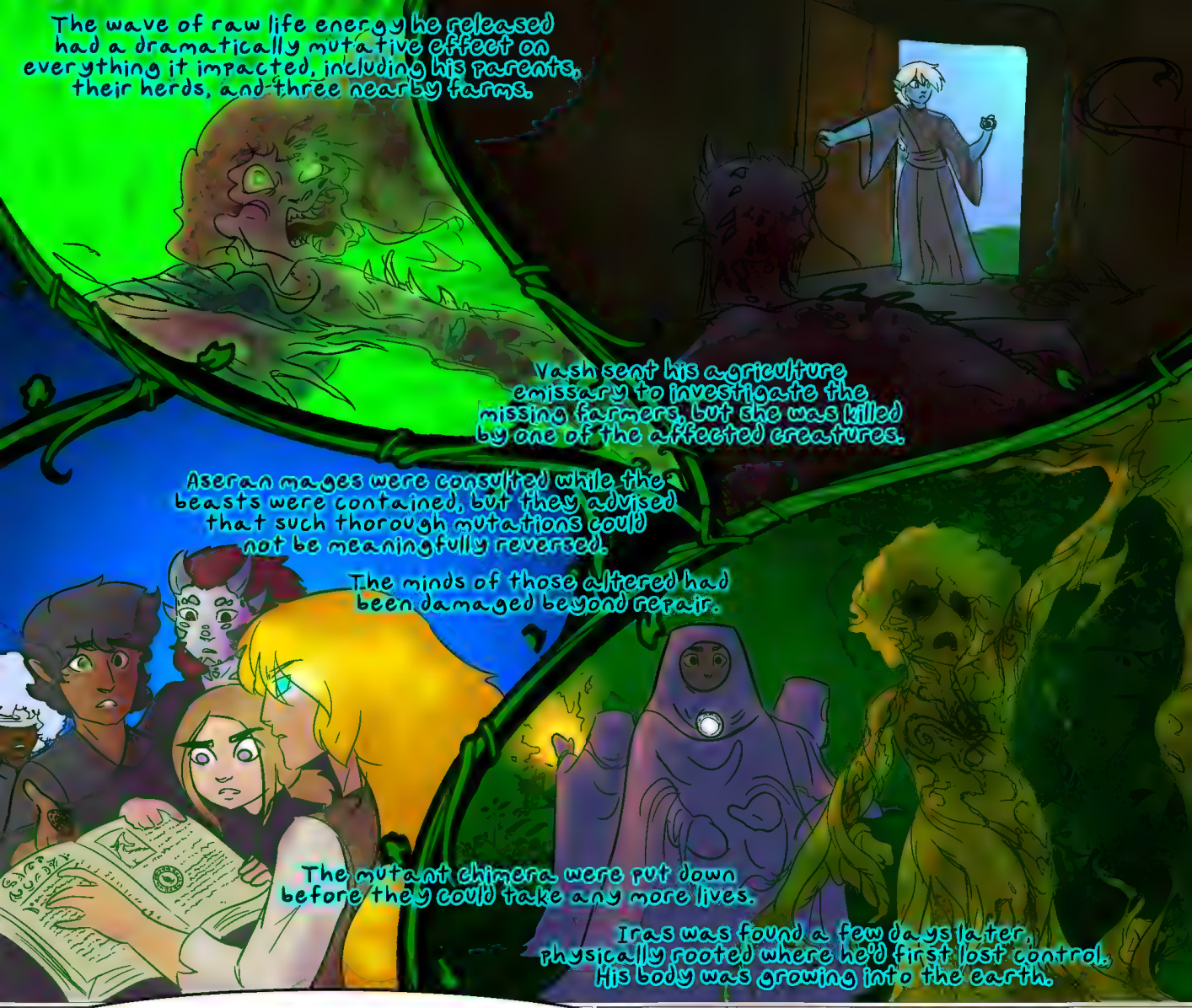
That's a rune tattoo. For channeling life magic.
It's not a tattoo.
Not a tattoo? What else could it-?
That doesn't make any sense.
Because I'm too old, right?
I wish I had an answer for you.
But I was born with the mark.
I carry the Chimeric Plague.
You're right. I'm a life mage. I... healed you, and I shaped this tree.
But the power has a mind of its own, and it's only getting harder to keep in check. It'll get stronger and stronger until I lose control entirely.
I shouldn't have made it past five years old.
When I felt the city being attacked, I thought maybe I could... hold it together long enough to help.
I was wrong.

I was just trying to heal you, but I... couldn't stop. I still don't know what I did to you.
If you were Vash, this wouldn't be a problem. Gods build their bodies from the ground up. He could fix anything I messed up.
...I don't suppose there's any chance you really ARE Vash, and that stab wound just made you lose your memory?
Vash is gone.
Great. Then we'll just have to wait and see what happens.
No, I can't wait.
Vash is GONE.
He must have gotten too far away. I can barely sense him anymore.
I have to-
NO! Don't you GET it?
I'm sorry, I really am, but none of this is going to MATTER!

You said you have Vash's memories?
...Distantly.
Well, he would understand what this situation means for both of us.
If you won't listen to ME, try asking HIM what kind of damage we could do.



Two hundred and seven years ago, the city of Vash experienced its first and last instance of the Chimeric Plague.
The event began silently, when an otherwise innocuous child was born in an outlying farm with an intricate green birthmark on his chest.
His name was Iras. His parents were shepherds.
Even before he could walk or talk, Iras showed great talent for healing and encouraging plant growth.
The farmers adored him and his unusual skill, never seen so strong in one so young.
Iras was a kind and gentle child. He freely shared his gift with anyone who asked.
Seventeen days before his fifth birthday, his power flared out of control.


The wave of raw life energy he released had a dramatically mutative effect on everything it impacted, including his parents, their herds, and three nearby farms.
Vash sent his agriculture emissary to investigate the missing farmers, but she was killed by one of the affected creatures.
Aseran mages were consulted while the beasts were contained, but they advised that such thorough mutations could not be meaningfully reversed.
The minds of those altered had been damaged beyond repair.
The mutant chimera were put down before they could take any more lives.
Iras was found a few days later, physically rooted where he'd first lost control. His body was growing into the earth.

The plague wasn't widely known at this point. They didn't even know what was happening.
We're lucky. We've already seen the worst case scenario.

Minimizing the damage is all that matters. Not Vash, not that "Collector" woman, not you or me.
If my magic is... is changing you, then all we can do is keep you contained.
Do you understand?

...Yes.
I don't want to hurt anyone.
Look, I don't want to... to SCARE you. You might not even be in any danger.
I was healing for years before I learned what I was.
We just need to wait a little to make sure.
If I really just healed you, it'll just be a little delay on your journey, and then you can forget this ever happened.
I won't forget.
Your healing saved my life.
I'll never forget that kindness.
But all that matters is finding Vash.
When do you think I can leave?
I don't know.
Maybe a day, if nothing changes.
All right.
What should I call you?

Huh?
Your name.
You're not Vash, so you need a name, right?
Oh.
I mean, yeah, I guess.
hmm
hmmmmm
Okay, well...
Let me know when you figure that out.

Got it!
PUMP
You picked a name, then?
No! I've got an idea!

CRACK
don't touch me
right, sorry
it's not healthy for either of us
of course
I need to go after Vash.
You may have mentioned.
And you need to keep an eye on me in case something goes wrong.
Yes.
And I'm guessing you're pretty confident in your ability to stop me if I try and leave.
Otherwise you would have put me somewhere more secure, or tricked me into staying here instead of being upfront.
...I guess.
Okay! So this is my idea-
Come with me!

That is NOT a good idea.
Hear me out!
Vash is empty - the city's gone, there's nobody left.
Even if you lost control, the only person you'd hurt is me.
And if it turns out I AM turning into a monster, being in the city won't prevent you from stopping me.
You can keep an eye on me, and I can go after Vash!
Look, I HAVE to find him. It's getting harder for me to-
Okay.
We'll check it out.
But we're not staying ANY longer than necessary.

You still need a name.
You're really hung up on that.
I don't see why you aren't!

What if I need to get your attention?
I'll be the only person around.
Just yell something.
You aren't taking this seriously. You realize how dangerous this is, right?
Even if the city is empty, there could still be chimeras around, or a million other things.
We could be walking into-
Did you hear that?
...Just the wind.
What do YOU hear?
A voice. I think.
...We should go back.
How are you feeling, physically?
I - no, I don't think it's that. I feel fine.
And I don't think chimeric mutation makes you hallucinate.
Not usually.

Okay. Let's keep going.
But tell me if it gets worse.
It's the city.
It's the people of Vash.

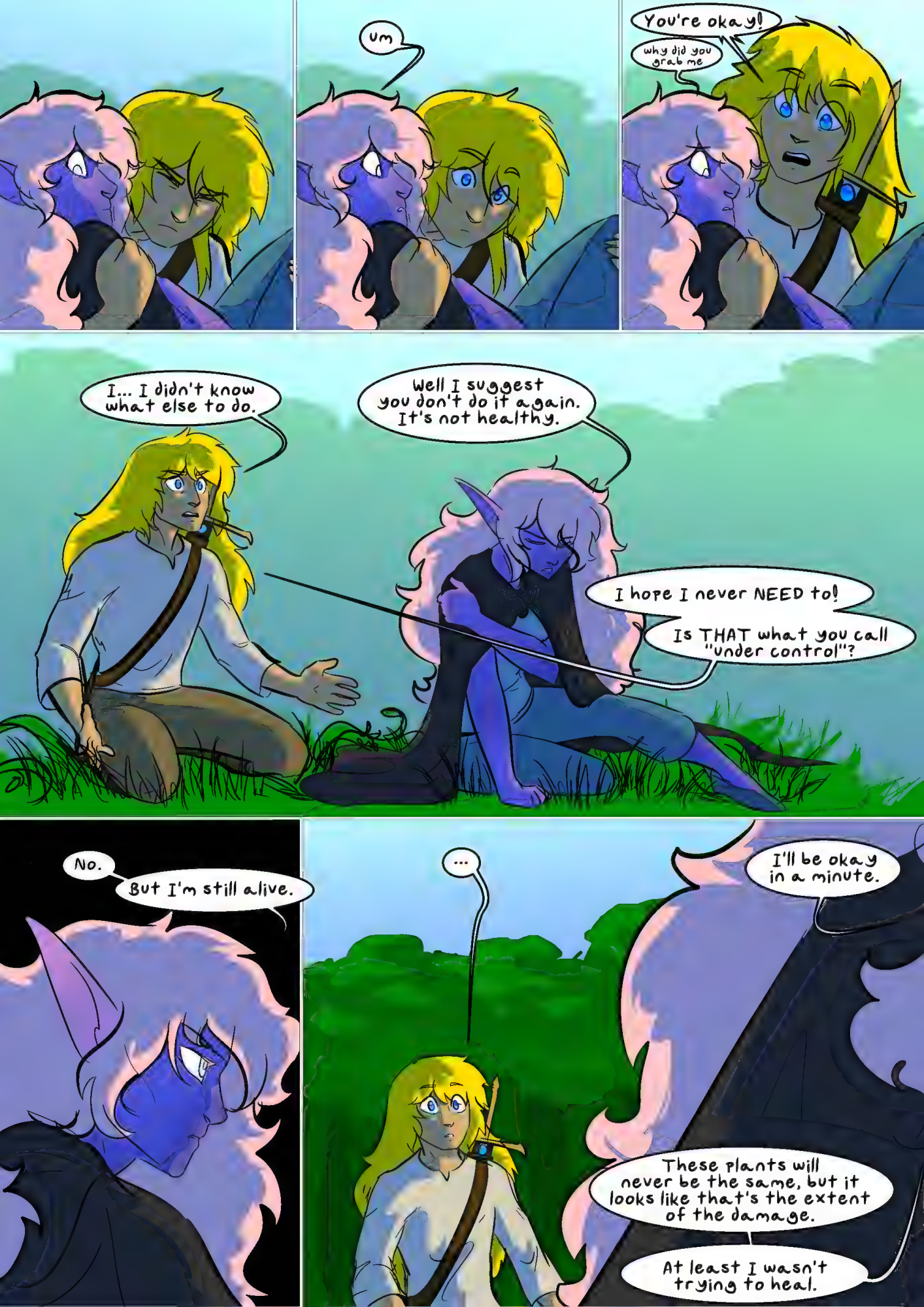
What? But they're-
They're connected to Vash. Like I am.
When they die, Vash has to break their connection to release them.
It's a... a funeral rite.
But Vash isn't here.
...Should we leave?
No.
This is WHY Vash needs me.

It's not collapsed. It's like the tunnel cinched shut behind her. No loose stone.
There's not even airflow.
It might be hundreds of feet of solid stone before it opens back up again.
You're not getting into the Singing Caves through here.
You can't open it?
Me? No!
But it was sealed by a life mage.
What?!
She made chimeras. And she controlled plants when Vash was-
Well she didn't do THIS with life magic!

Life magic only affects LIVING things. Plants, animals, whatever's in-between. I can't reshape stone any more than a - a fire mage could make it snow!
Did you ask me to come because you thought I could-?
There has to be something.
I have to do SOMETHING.
Hey!
Are you serious? That's never going to-
You can't dig through solid rock!
What ELSE can I do?
sigh
Move.

Huh?
If we're just using brute force anyway...
Let's see if this helps.

What are you DOING?!
You're right. It'd be wrong to leave your people like this.
Maybe I can break up the rock enough to open the way - and if I can't, your bare hands wouldn't have worked either.
But this is too much!
We can find another way, you don't have to-!
It's okay.
Growing plants is the first trick I learned. I do it to meditate.
I have this under control


Um
You're okay!
Why did you grab me
I... I didn't know what else to do.
Well I suggest you don't do it again. It's not healthy.
I hope I never NEED to!
Is THAT what you call "under control"?
No.
But I'm still alive.
...
I'll be okay in a minute.
These plants will never be the same, but it looks like that's the extent of the damage.
At least I wasn't trying to heal.

I don't understand. Why did you do that?
You could have died.
sigh
I'll die anyway.
But I... don't get many opportunities to do anything good.
That might make this all worth it.
I'll take it slower this time. Let me just-
NO!
No. I'm sorry. I'll find another way.

...Are you sure?
This might be your best shot at chasing her down. I really don't mind-
No.
How could I possibly help the dead by sacrificing the living?
Nobody dies. Not for me.
Not ever.

Oh, no. I'm so sorry.
I keep forgetting you're less than a day old.
What? I -
You've been surrounded by nothing but death for literally your entire life, and all I've been talking about are my own problems with it.
Of COURSE you're freaking out. I've had a decade to process it. You've had an hour.
Listen, death is... scary, but it's not the most important thing in your life. You have to live for more than just survival.
I hope you get to see what I mean.
But for now, let's just get out of here.
And I'm sorry for being such a depressing introduction to the rest of your life.
It's - it's fine.
And I'll try not to die while you're around.
...
...Thank you.

You might need to stay a little longer, since you sort of... re-exposed yourself to my wild magic.
That's okay. I need to plan out my next move anyway.
You can also spend that time picking a name.
Is that really more important?
Look, if you don't pick something, I'm just going to start yelling embarrassing nicknames until you respond.
Like, uh...
Hm. You don't nickname easily.
"Blondie"? It's kind of generic.
Wait -
GRRRRR
GRRRRND
CRACK
CRACK

Did you hear something?